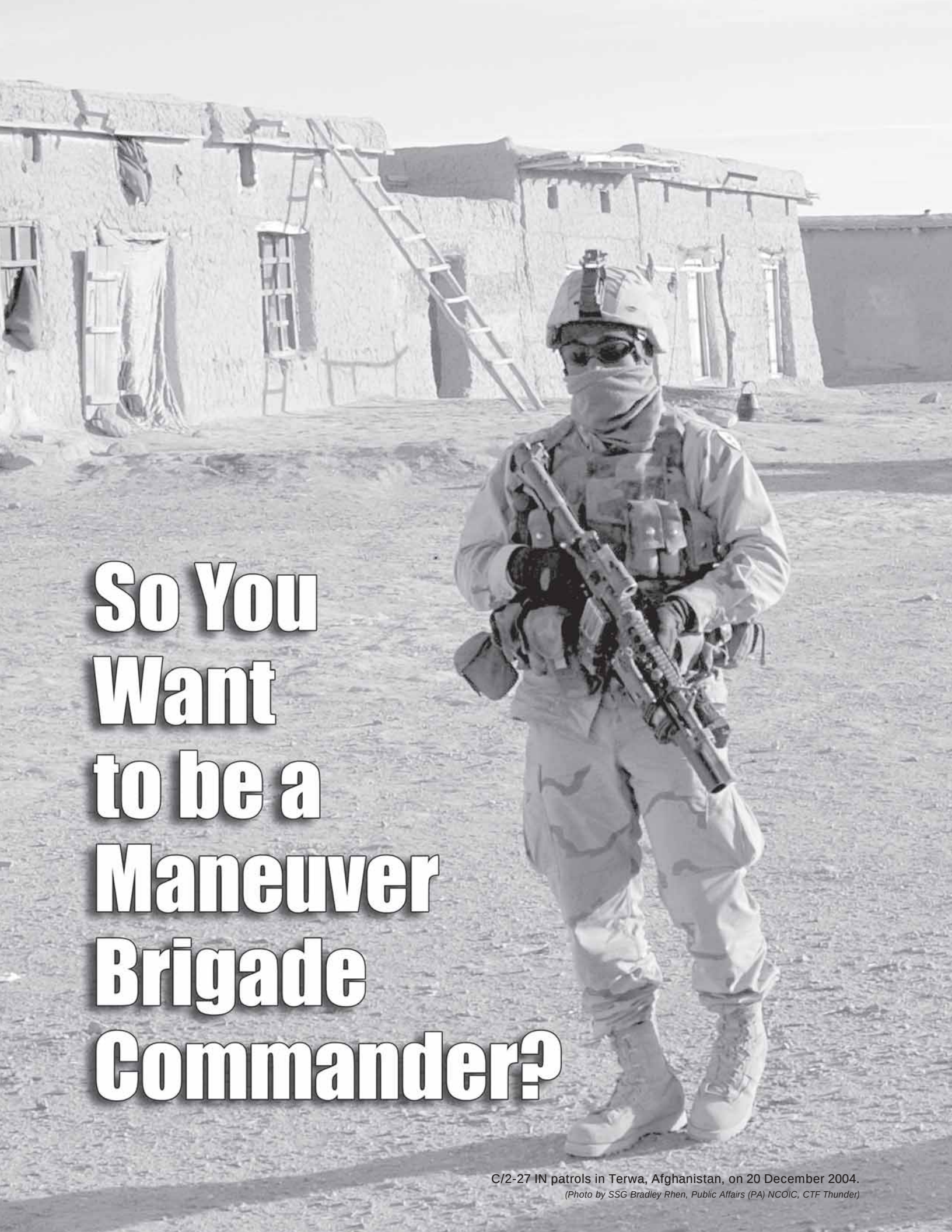

So You Want to be a Maneuver Brigade Commander?

C/2-27 IN patrols in Terwa, Afghanistan, on 20 December 2004.
(Photo by SSG Bradley Rhen, Public Affairs (PA) NCOIC, CTF Thunder)

CTF Thunder in Afghanistan

By Colonel Gary H. Cheek

As one might expect, deployment orders sending the 25th Infantry Division (Light) (25th ID), *Tropic Lightning,* into combat for the first time since the Vietnam War caused great excitement all across the military community at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Unfortunately, even though the division would deploy into two theaters, Afghanistan and Iraq, the Division Artillery was not on the original troop list—we would, it seemed, be left behind.

However, that all changed on 21 February 2004 when the Department of the Army tasked the division to source a second maneuver brigade headquarters in Afghanistan. Our commanding general tapped the division artillery (Div Arty) for this mission; we, ultimately, were known as Combined Task Force (CTF) Thunder. Suddenly we were on the team; we were elated with the chance to make a contribution to our nation's Global War on Terrorism, albeit in a non-traditional role.

In just over 90 days, we deployed to Afghanistan to direct operations in Regional Command East as a provisional infantry brigade responsible for 16 provinces in the eastern region of Afghanistan.

After eight months of a yearlong tour in theater, this article examines the experience of the 25th Div Arty in Afghanistan and offers some thoughts on maneuver brigade command for Field Artillerymen and combined arms warriors everywhere.

Understanding the Conflict in Afghanistan. Sun Tzu's maxim to "know the enemy and know yourself" is sound advice for any conflict; the war in Afghanistan is no exception. Add to this the people, weather, terrain, culture, regional neighbors and a host of foreign interests, and Sun Tzu's words take on incredible complexity.

Yet understanding the operational construct is fundamental to efficiently applying resources and operations to achieve the effects necessary to accomplish the mission and, ultimately, win the conflict. This was one of our first endeavors as a brigade headquarters: examine the conflict and commit ourselves to an overarching construct that would serve as the foundation for our operations.

"Seeing the enemy" might seem simple at first—Taliban, Al Qaeda and the other insurgent elements we faced in Afghanistan. Yet, what is the enemy center of gravity? Does one exist with so many factions? Does it matter?

In our assessment, we determined the enemy's center of gravity to be his radical ideology—a binding force that centers on hatred of the West and serves to motivate combatants, attract recruits and, significantly, gain the sympathy and support of the general population. We were careful to differentiate between the violence, Jihad and intolerance of the various terrorist groups, the discriminators that made these actors and their ideology "radical," and the more moderate and mainstream interpretations of Islam by other groups.

Identifying this center of gravity drives home that this war is larger than just kinetic operations against insurgents and their leadership; it is also about the Afghan people. To be victorious we must win their trust and confidence through our actions, reconstruction of their infrastructure and information operations (IO) that advocate moderate Islam for the people with a peaceful and prosperous future for their children.

I would argue that getting this *right* is essential to success—misunderstanding the enemy drives you to operations that may do little to further your cause and, in the end, could even be counterproductive.

"Seeing yourself" also would seem

simple enough—perhaps just laying down the order of battle for our own forces and those of our allies. Yet, what stands out as the center of gravity?

At first blush, we might look for combat force, some aspect of our ability to strike the enemy or some asymmetrical advantage we have over our adversary, such as air power. However, our assessment is that the Afghan Government is the friendly center of gravity. This, again, is important, as it directs us to do more than combat operations against the insurgents—it directs us to continuously strengthen the Afghan Government while attacking those forces that seek to disrupt or destroy it—be they enemy or some aspect of the environment.

Photo by SSG Bradley Rhen, PA NCOIC, CTF Thunder

COL Gary H. Cheek, Commander of Combined Task Force (CTF) Thunder, and CPT Tage Rainsford, Commander of C Company, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, listen to village elders on 20 December 2004 in Waza Khwa, Afghanistan.

As the government gains strength and wins the trust and confidence of the populace, the people will, in turn, deny sanctuary, support and manpower to the enemy. The people's support is just as essential to success as understanding the enemy.

As for the environment, CTF Thunder commands the eastern portion of Afghanistan, 16 provinces in an area roughly the size of the state of Iowa. The terrain ranges from rolling high desert in the southeast to rugged mountains in the west and mountainous regions in the north with low-lying river valleys and sparse forests. Overall, the region is arid, hampered by drought over the past several years. Temperatures are significantly impacted by altitudes: lower areas have hot summers and mild winters while the high deserts across the mountain ranges have hot summers and cold winters.

Paved roads are rare—some provinces have none. Riverbeds are the typical road networks, and such conditions make for slow road traffic.

Afghan society is tribal, with strong village structures and elder influences and a host of alliances, feuds and disputes that have been around for generations.

The tribal society, compartmentalized terrain and size of the area of operations (AO) mandates distributed operations over a nonlinear battlefield. It places enormous trust in company- and platoon-level commanders as each must operate independently with great responsibility.

This construct is the basic foundation for our operations in Afghanistan: defeat the insurgents, strengthen the government and win the trust and confidence of the population. Our goals follow the doctrinal basis for counterinsurgency warfare where you seek to separate guerillas from the population.

We offer the Afghans tremendous advantages over our adversaries: a promise of security, good governance, reconstruction of the war-torn infrastructure and, above all, a peaceful and prosperous future. Our adversaries offer threats, destruction of property, oppression of various groups and a virtual guarantee that violence will continue through many generations. It is a compelling difference, one that gives us enormous credibility with the Afghan people as they see the genuine sincerity of American policy through our actions.

CTF Thunder: A Study in Diversity. Matched to this operational construct is CTF Thunder's rather unique task organization. It consists of three US infantry battalions: 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry (2-27 IN), 25th Division, the *Wolfhounds;* 3-3 Marines from Marine Corps Base Hawaii, *America's Battalion*; and 3-16 IN, 29th Infantry Division (Light), Virginia Army National Guard, *Normandy*. We also have three Afghan National Army infantry battalions: the 2d and 3d Kandak Battalions and the 23d Kandak Battalion. This is an infantry footprint that may increase as time goes on.

In addition, we have eight Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that are interagency organizations focused on reconstruction and good governance at various locations within our AO.

We have several other attachments, but one element we lack is a direct support (DS) Field Artillery battalion—although we share two of the four firing batteries from our sister brigade to the south.

That we can bring these diverse units together and be successful is a tribute not only to our headquarters, but also to our incredible teamwork and the versatility of our military.

In addition, we host a variety of other units and agencies throughout our AO, each with its own missions, capabilities and chain of command. While on the surface one would see unity of command issues from such a structure, much of this is obviated by continuous coordination and unity of effort toward common goals. It takes continuous emphasis to bring units together and continuous oversight of all operations to ensure the effects generated by any operation contribute to the overall strategy for the region.

Key Lessons. Against this backdrop of a diverse organization thrust into a complex operating environment, what are the key lessons I learned?

War really is an extension of politics. In a counterinsurgency conflict, such as the one in Afghanistan, the political aspects of operations are perhaps more important than the combat operations. All company-level leaders must devote considerable energy to engaging a host of local informal and formal leaders, to include those who are part of the government as well as tribal elders and religious mullahs. Influential leaders

who support coalition efforts contribute to our overarching goal to separate insurgents from the population and strengthen support for the Afghan Government.

IO takes continued, well organized and synchronized efforts as well as positive and continuous relations with both local and international press. It means being sensitive to the Afghan culture, adapting to changes in the environment and, above all, being forthright and honest in everything we do.

An additional benefit of working extensively with the local population is that it builds relationships between the Soldier and the people, one that engenders a desire within the Soldier to help the people through both combat operations and humanitarian assistance. The Afghan conflict, in essence, is a human battlefield where the objectives are not hills or towns, but rather the people themselves.

Commit yourself to an operational construct. Through our military schooling, we are well versed in the orders process and such mundane, but essential, tasks as mission analysis and the military decision-making process (MDMP).

Many times leaders are reluctant to venture into identifying the operational cornerstones upon which they will build their plans. This is largely because no leader wants to suffer the embarrassment of fixating on a "center of gravity" only to be shown that his intellectual "sword" has a few dings on the edge.

However, committing yourself to this endeavor reaps some veiled benefits that can greatly enhance operations. For example, supporting national elections might seem an odd fit for a military force, and some might say that elections rightly belong in the domain of the State Department or United Nations. Yet, by viewing the Afghan Government as our center of gravity, we saw the elections as a forcing function to accelerate the growth and strength of government leaders and their security apparatus.

Keeping your eye on the center of gravity keeps your mind open to opportunities that might otherwise be hidden in less sophisticated thinking. In the case of Afghan Presidential Elections, the successful elections elevated the prestige of the government, increased the confidence of the local police and the Afghan National Army and greatly accelerated the growth of all. The elections were a decisive win with lasting positive results.

Write terms of reference for senior leaders. While this is always a good practice, it is particularly important for combat deployments where inevitably there will be a lot of non-standard requirements and command relationships.

For example, we were blessed with a deputy commanding officer (DCO), an Infantry officer pre-positioned for battalion command. While there could be concerns that adding a DCO would cause friction between him and the executive officer (XO) or even the S3, having written terms of reference for key leaders—the DCO, XO, S3 and command sergeant major (CSM)—helped clarify their roles and responsibilities.

In the end, personalities make a big difference, but our DCO became the staff synchronizer and planner, leaving the XO to focus on logistics and base operations and the S3 to focus on current operations and near-term planning. My experience has shown me the value of writing terms of reference as well as the extraordinary value-added a DCO provides.

Build teams and relationships for the future. While this may seem obvious at first glance, building teams is *key* to success and must start as early as possible. Continuous, positive contact with provincial leaders at all levels is like financial investments—some will pay big dividends while others bear no fruit. Likewise, establishing positive and cooperative relations with other units reduces friction when circumstances require working together.

The key is that you have to build relationships to have them when you need them. A great example of this was when we had three non-combatant deaths in one of our provinces. The relationship the battalion commander had established with the governor of that province proved to be key in defusing a very difficult situation. Without that positive relationship, the governor might have aggravated the situation to advance his own interests.

The same holds true with joint and combined combat operations. Welcoming other units into your tent, contributing forces to their operations, providing support for their operations and sharing intelligence all pay off when you need to include their capabilities in your operations. Such was the case in one particular operation in Kunar Province that included forces and assets from no less than eight separate organizations.

Photo by CPL Rich Mattingly

Marines from 3d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment, part of CTF Thunder, leap from a CH-47 Chinook helicopter onto the snowy hills of Korangal, Afghanistan, during Operation Spurs in January.

Commanders and leaders can't wait until they need help to build relationships—by that time, it's too late.

Be positive in all communications—up and down. A wise commander shared an interesting philosophy with me: "'Bad mouth' no one." His point was nothing good comes from critical or cynical comments about other units, leaders or Soldiers. To that

end, we established two philosophies within the Thunder Brigade: First love your higher headquarters, and second ensure our own headquarters is adding value to the operations of subordinates.

Loving our higher headquarters was not difficult as its guidance, policies and products were all great assets to our operations and its various staff sections had superb talent. Positive relations with our higher headquarters fostered increased productivity based upon healthy relationships between the various staff principals and their counterparts.

Likewise, our relationships with our 11 subordinate units had to be founded on actions—not words. We were determined not to be a headquarters that focused simply on deadlines and reports. We listened patiently to the needs of our subordinate units and pushed hard to remedy every issue they had. Our S4 section was a particularly heroic section, meticulously tracking every material request and following it up until completion.

Positive communications facilitate cooperation and, in the end, enhance operations to the benefit of all.

Trust everyone—but keep your powder dry. Conducting brigade-level operations in an AO the size of Iowa is a bit larger than our doctrine suggests. The size of the AO mandates decentralized operations with a clear understanding that neither you nor your forces can be everywhere at once. Brigade-level operations synchronizing multiple battalions in our AO are rare. We execute virtually all operations by allocating resources and giving guidance. This places a premium on trust—afforded at every level of command.

Battlefield circulation became key, and it is how I "keep my powder dry," ensuring subordinates are executing operations within our intent and that of the Combined Joint Task Force 76 (CJTF-76) Commanding General. I learned that our subordinates are magnificent in execution and that I gained more from my experiences with them than they could have gained from any "pearls of wisdom" or corrective actions from me.

In nonlinear operations, a commander unaccustomed to trusting his subordinates will stifle initiative and, while he may ensure perfection of a few missions, he'll get far less done than he would by giving guidance, providing resources and trusting his subordinate leaders to accomplish multiple missions at once.

I learned to trust my instincts as well, placing myself in operations where I felt my personal presence would be a combat multiplier.

Keep the fire in your eye! Spending a year deployed is a long time. As with any operation of this duration, it is important to continuously challenge the organization and its subordinate elements. The commander should never be content with the status quo and should always be looking for a way to improve operations and the efficiency of the organization. Just as important, he must recognize those Soldiers and leaders who take up the challenge and find new ways to do business.

Interestingly, innovation is one of the true virtues of a yearlong deployment. It took us several months to really understand the battlefield as well as the complexities of our operations. By constantly pushing innovation, we moved forward in virtually every area—measuring effects, battle tracking, counterstrike, intelligence fusion, reconstruction, good governance, communications systems, Soldier quality of life, air-ground integration, public affairs—the list is unending.

Challenging Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines to "keep the fire in their eye" ensures your unit always moves forward and, just as important, keeps your joint troopers excited about the contributions they are making to the mission.

Some Thoughts on Maneuver Brigade Command. In the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, the warden admonished Luke, telling him "A man's got to know his limitations." That's pretty sage advice that certainly speaks to me as a Field Artillery officer commanding an Infantry brigade in combat. No officer has perfect experience; all are missing some job, some experience that would make them a better leader. Not being an Infantryman might be enough for many to say I am not qualified for my current position. Fair enough.

But I would say that it begs the question: Must an officer be an Infantryman or tanker to be qualified to command a combined arms formation at the brigade level? I'll leave the answer to the Army's leadership—but I will offer to our younger audience some thoughts about my experience and what has helped me the most as an FA maneuver brigade commander that might help them in the future.

Service in DS units. I have served in both general support (GS) and DS FA units. My DS experience included operations with armored cavalry, mechanized infantry and armor units. Oddly enough, it did not include light infantry. But, my experience with five different brigade-level commanders and intimate workings with the staffs at the field grade level were essential to my ability to direct a maneuver brigade staff.

For all Field Artillery officers, I would advocate service in DS units. Without this experience, you simply will not fully understand the complexity and nature of maneuver operations.

The School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and the Advanced Strategic Arts Program (ASAP). SAMS at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, added an intellectual edge to my experience base, giving depth to my understanding of current operations in the crucible of military history and theory. Spending a year studying the profession of arms enlightened me in the art and science of war, and the follow-on year as a division planner helped me understand the MDMP and the complexities of war plans, exercises and operational planning. These experiences enabled me to better understand the complex environment of Afghanistan and lead our staff through the campaign planning process for our yearlong deployment.

I also was fortunate enough to attend ASAP at the Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. This program focused on strategic planning and joint and combined operations. In addition, it introduced me to emerging warfighting concepts, such as effects-based operations (EBO).

Taken together, these programs offer officers opportunities to challenge themselves intellectually and provide a base of knowledge for analysis and decision making.

Observer/Controller (O/C) at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California. It is hard to beat the tactical skills you develop as an O/C at any of our Army's training centers. A general officer once told me, "I thought I was a pretty damn good battalion commander until I went to be an O/C at the NTC and found out how little I knew about our profession." Truer words have never been spoken as O/Cs stay immersed in tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs).

Having spent two years after battalion command as Wolf 07, I was amazed at how much I learned about warfighting

and the synchronization of combined arms warfare on the battlefields of the NTC. There is, perhaps, no greater professional experience for both officers and NCOs than to serve as O/Cs at one of our Combat Training Centers (CTCs).

So you want to be a maneuver brigade commander? It is a great honor to serve our nation at a time when we face such an enormous threat. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of this fight in any capacity, and my time as a Div Arty commander leading an infantry brigade in combat is the highlight of my career. Our experiences in Afghanistan are rich in their lessons and rewarding in accomplishments.

While there is some uncertainty in the future of Redlegs' brigade command opportunities, I encourage all Field Artillery officers to "stay the course" and choose the path that will make them the best combined arms leaders possible.

From the observation post (OP) to the battlefield coordination detachment (BCD), Field Artillerymen are the Army's integrators of joint fires and effects, duties that keep us intimately involved in combined arms operations. As the Chief of Field Artillery said in his January-February column, Field Artillerymen have a "feel for the battle—a deep understanding that we share instantly at every level … Field Artillerymen, quite simply, '*get* it.'"

The experiences and training you receive today are what ensure that you will "*get* it" and will be essential to your development as a leader in the future—perhaps of a maneuver brigade.

Colonel Gary H. Cheek commands the 25th Infantry Division (Light) Artillery out of Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. He deployed to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom in June 2004 to command the 25th Division's Combined Task Force Thunder, an Infantry brigade, for 12 months. He also served as the Senior Fire Support Trainer (Wolf07) at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. Other assignments include commanding the 1st Battalion, 9th Field Artillery (1-9 FA), 3d Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Stewart, Georgia; and serving as Executive Officer of the 1-41 FA and G3 Plans Officer, both in the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Stewart; and Exchange Officer in the Canadian Field Artillery School at the Canadian Forces Base Gagetown, New Brunswick, Canada. He commanded A/2-28 FA, part of the 210th Field Artillery Brigade, VII Corps, Germany.

M777 Starts Fielding in the 11th Marines

The new M777 lightweight 155-mm towed howitzer will begin fielding in May to the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines at Twentynine Palms, California.

The M777 is replacing the aging 155-mm towed M198 howitzer. Some of the M777's greatest improvements are in its mobility, transportability, survivability and lethality. The M777 can be emplaced and ready to fire in less than two minutes, which is significantly faster than the M198.

Marine Unit	Location	M-NET	O-NET
FY05			
11th	29 Palms, CA	May 05	May 05
11th	Camp Pendleton, CA	Aug 05	Aug 05
FY06			
EEAP	29 Palms	Feb 06	N/A
11th	Camp Pendleton	May 06	May 06
10th	Camp Lejeune, NC	Jun 06	Jun 06
10th	Camp Lejeune	Jul 06	Aug 06
10th	Camp Lejeune	Sep 06	Sep 06
FY07			
10th	Camp Lejeune	Oct 06	Oct 06
5th SBCT	Schofield Barracks, HI	Dec 06	Dec 06

Legend:
EEAP = Enhanced Equipment Allowance Pool
M-NET = Maintenance New Equipment Training
O-NET = Operations New Equipment Training
SBCT = Stryker Brigade Combat Team

Current Fielding Schedule for the M777

The new weapon can be rapidly displaced within two to three minutes, allowing the battery to shoot and move before the enemy can return fire. Its light weight (less than 10,000 pounds) and independent suspension allow the weapon to travel over rougher terrain (worldwide, that amounts to about 30 percent more terrain) and be sling-loaded under more aircraft than the M198.

It fires all current and planned 155-mm munitions. Although its max range is still 30,000 meters with current rocket-assisted projectiles, that range will extend to more than 37,000 meters when firing the new global positioning system/inertial navigation unit (GPS/INU) precision-guided Excalibur munition. The max rate of fire is four rounds per minute while the sustained rate is two rounds per minute.

Within a year of the initial M777 deliveries, both the Marine Corps and Army will start taking delivery of the M777A1, which adds a digital fire control system (DFCS). The DFCS provides the howitzer highly accurate self-location and directional control. With the introduction of DFCS, the battery only requires survey control points to initialize the system.

The section chief will have a navigational aid inside the cab, and the weapon has an onboard single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS) and amplifier for digital communications. This provides greater flexibility for the howitzer, which no longer will be tied to wire communications.

The M777A1 provides commanders greater flexibility in getting to the fight, carrying out their missions and quickly moving to safe locations to carry out subsequent missions.

If units have questions, they can call me at the M777 New Equipment Training Team (NETT) at Fort Sill, Oklahoma: Commercial (580) 442-4418/5301; the DSN prefix is 639. Units can email me with their questions: waco.lane@sill.army.mil.

Capt Waco Lane, USMC
XO, M777 NETT, Fort Sill, OK